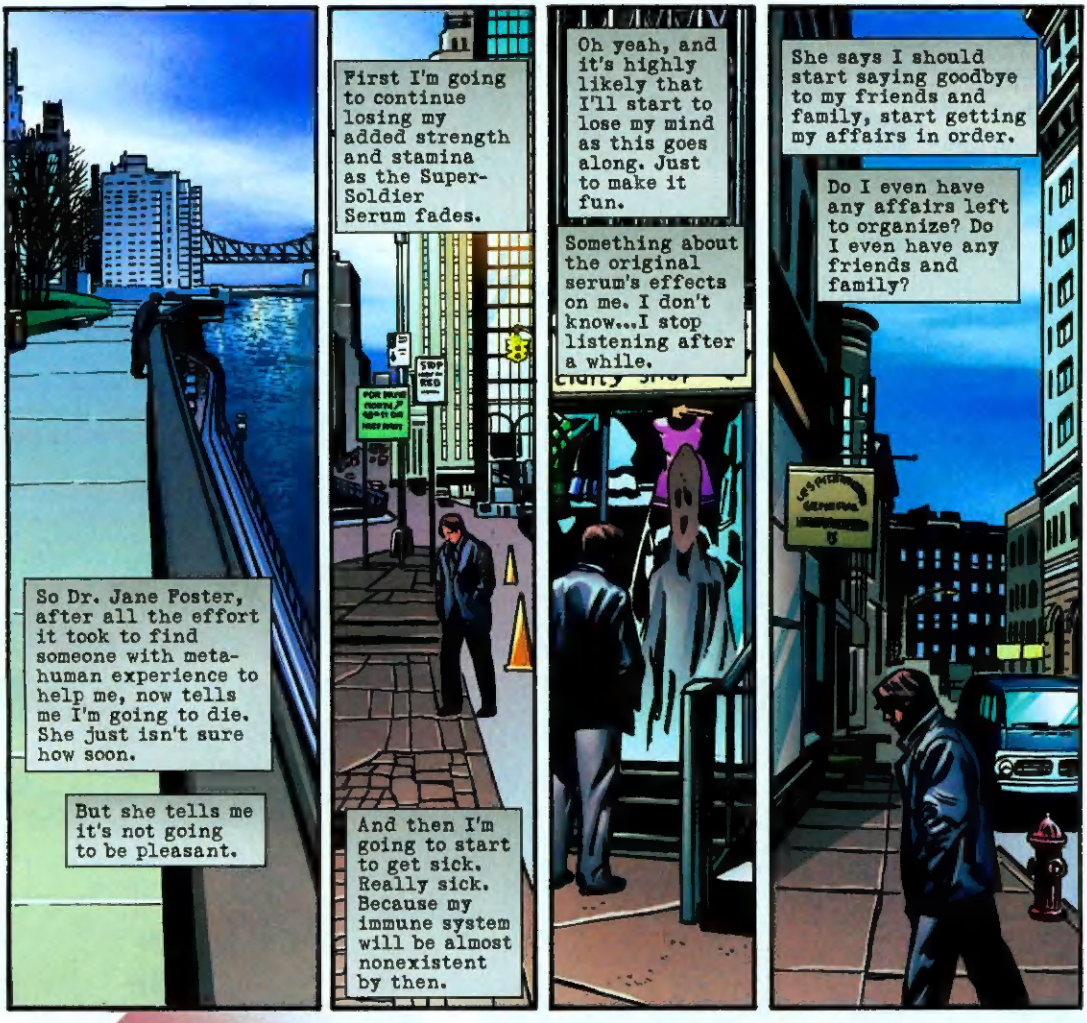
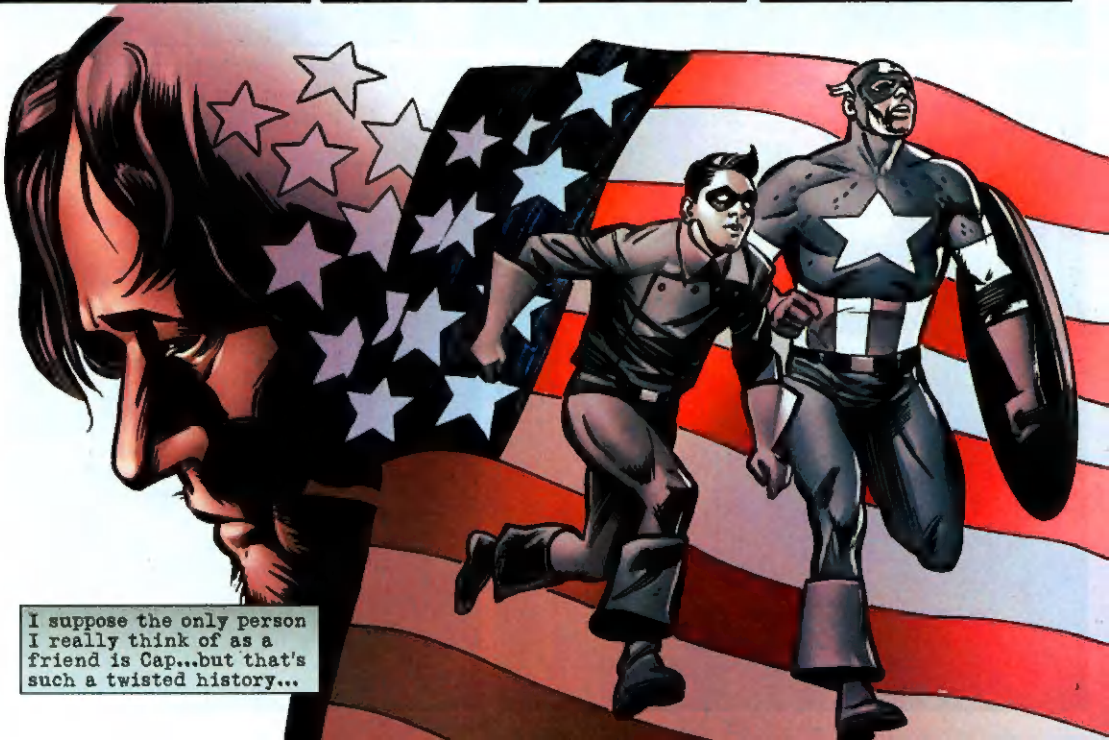
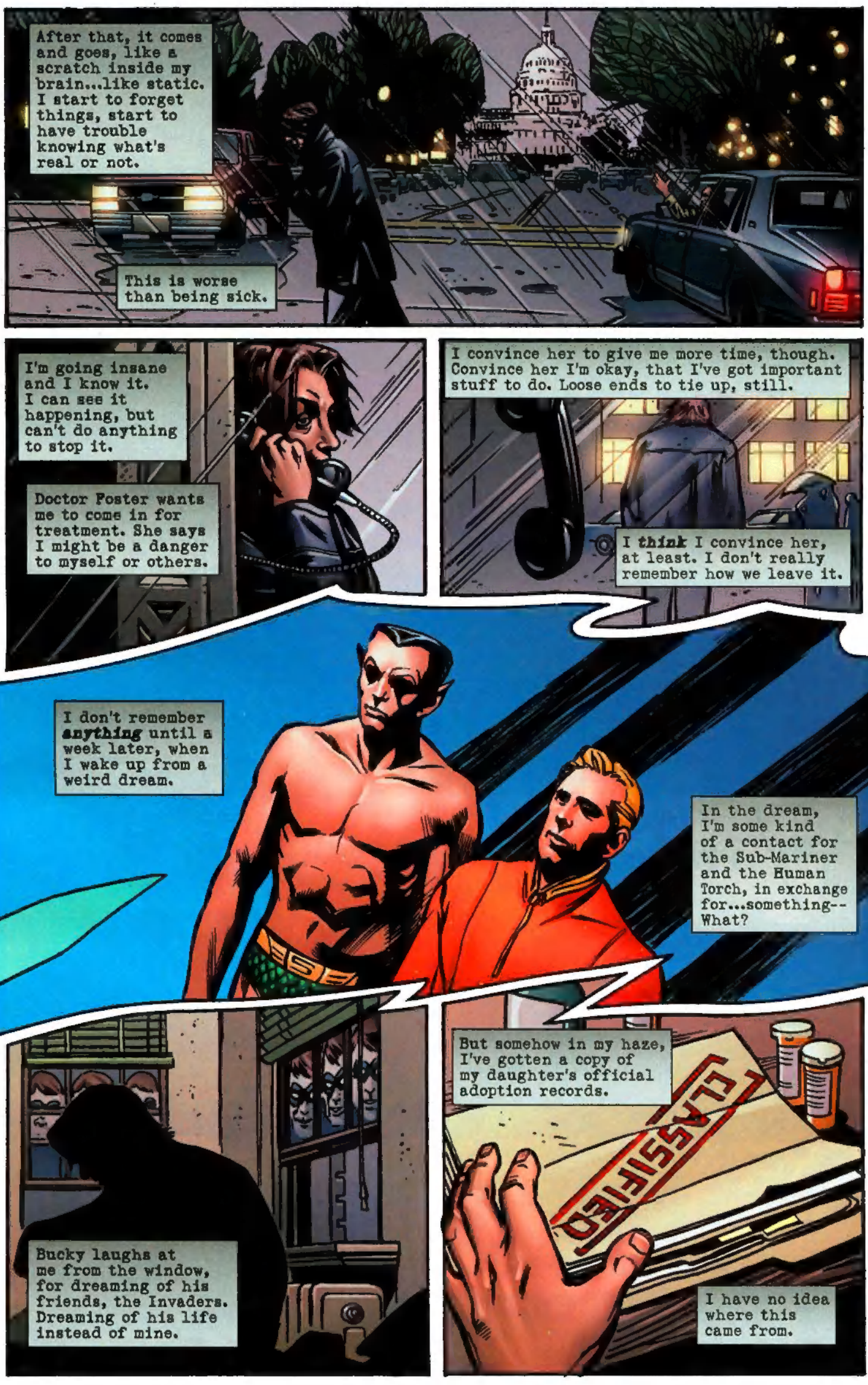

So Dr. Jane Foster, after all the effort it took to find someone with meta-human experience to help me, now tells me I'm going to die. She just isn't sure how soon.
But she tells me it's not going to be pleasant.
First I'm going to continue losing my added strength and stamina as the Super-Soldier Serum fades.
And then I'm going to start to get sick. Really sick. Because my immune system will be almost nonexistent by then.
Oh yeah, and it's highly likely that I'll start to lose my mind as this goes along. Just to make it fun.
Something about the original serum's effects on me. I don't know...I stop listening after a while.
She says I should start saying goodbye to my friends and family, start getting my affairs in order.
Do I even have any affairs left to organize? Do I even have any friends and family?


I suppose the only person I really think of as a friend is Cap...but that's such a twisted history...

I tell myself it's nothing. A little fluid in my lungs, a bad chest cold-- I'll be okay.
I overdose on vitamins.
I'll be okay.
Around day two on bed rest, I understand what Doctor Foster meant about losing my mind.
HHUUAACKKK!
OH... MAN...
--DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?
WHAT--?
HOW THE HELL COULD YOU POSSIBLY TRY TO REPLACE ME? SOME LOSER LIKE YOU? NO FREAKING WAY! WHO THE HELL DO YOU--
AHHH!
KSSHH!
But his face just laughs out of the broken mirror at me, anyway...


After that, it comes and goes, like a scratch inside my brain...like static. I start to forget things, start to have trouble knowing what's real or not.
This is worse than being sick.
I'm going insane and I know it. I can see it happening, but can't do anything to stop it.
Doctor Foster wants me to come in for treatment. She says I might be a danger to myself or others.
I convince her to give me more time, though. Convince her I'm okay, that I've got important stuff to do. Loose ends to tie up, still.
I *think* I convince her, at least. I don't really remember how we leave it.
I don't remember **anything** until a week later, when I wake up from a weird dream.
In the dream, I'm some kind of a contact for the Sub-Mariner and the Human Torch, in exchange for...something--What?
But somehow in my haze, I've gotten a copy of my daughter's official adoption records.
CLASSIFIED
I have no idea where this came from.
Bucky laughs at me from the window, for dreaming of his friends, the Invaders. Dreaming of his life instead of mine.

Her name is Julia now. Julia Winters.
She seems happy, and she's growing up with parents who clearly love her, and who can give her the things I never could.
Like a normal life. Like stability.
I'm happy for her. Really.
And I'm just thinking about heading back to New York to Doctor Foster, like she wants, when I overhear something at the bar.
--SURE, YEAH, RIGHT OUTSIDE THE PARKING LOT AT THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL. KIDS'RE JUST MONSTERS FOR THE STUFF... MAKIN' SERIOUS BANK...
There's a major-league drug dealer operating in this town, right out of this bar. Selling dope to the kids at Julia's school.
She's just in first grade, and there's already some scum trying to get her strung out.
She may have new parents... but she still needs protection, damn it...

I've done this before, tackling organized crime, drug distribution.
You start at the bottom and work your way up the chain. It's always the same.
The little ones break easy, and they lead you to the big ones.
Even with my condition, I can do this. I could do this in my sleep, take out goons like this...vultures preying on little kids...
I can hold my sanity together long enough to take these guys down.
I know I can.

Aren't I just a double, myself? Aren't I so many different people already?
Maybe we're all different people all the time...maybe our identity is just fragments of memory and time...
Maybe every time we change our lives, change direction, change hairstyles and outfits, another one of us grows to take our place.
Sheds us like a snakeskin.
Or maybe every crazy thought in my head is part of some cancerous doppelganger that's been stalking me my entire life.
That's the scariest part of knowing you're losing your mind...
It starts to make sense after a while. It starts to feel inevitable.
I just have to hold on... for her. Just have to keep him inside my head. I can do that.

FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Okay, here we are again, the CAPTAIN AMERICA letters page. I love that people are just starting to realize we actually have a letters page. I guess they were gone for so long people stopped looking for them. Anyway, on to it...

I've never been much of a Captain America fan, at least not in his solo series, but this all changed when Ed Brubaker took over with this latest run on CAPTAIN AMERICA! Having Cap working with S.H.I.E.L.D., Interpol and other heroes, such as Union Jack, has only added to the enjoyment of this title for me. And as a U.K. resident I loved Union Jack's cameo, and I hope we see more of him as time passes. I was also delighted to see William Naslund and Jeff Mace's graves in this issue. It's rare indeed for a writer to look at the other men to hold the mantle of Captain America, and I always appreciate it when a writer takes such detailed continuity and actually USES it in their story. Before I go, I have some questions which I hope you can answer:

1) Can we expect frequent guest star appearances throughout Ed Brubaker's run?

2) How far ahead have you planned the series, Mr. Brubaker?

3) Will Cap find romance in this series with someone other than Sharon Carter?

4) Will the New Avengers guest star at any point?

5) Is there any chance of seeing the V-Battalion (which Fabian Nicieza created) in this series?

James Hunter
Cheltenham, England

1–Yes, though our definitions of "frequent" may differ. But expect to see many of Cap's friends appear here and there.

2–Probably too far. I've got ideas and storyline for at least a few years.

3–Who can say? Well, I guess I could, but I'm not going to.

4–Probably. Just wait for sales to dip low enough. Oh wait, did I just say that out loud?

5–No. Hey, at least it's a straight answer, right?

And now we've got two letters from what I can only assume, because they were written in pencil with giant writing, is either Brian Bendis trying to mess with me, or an actual kid who reads CAPTAIN AMERICA. I'm hoping for the latter (and the spelling is good, so it's probably not Brian).

Dear Captain America,

Why is Captain America having flashbacks? Is it because of bad nightmares or is it because he is thinking about Bucky, his old sidekick that died?

From,
Taylor Brossard
Pleasanton, CA

Dear Captain America,

I just finished reading CAPTAIN AMERICA number four. Then I remembered that Sharon Carter, also known as Agent 13 died. Did Red Skull die before Agent Thirteen? Or did you make it up?

From,
Taylor Brossard
Pleasanton, CA

Hey, Taylor--thanks for writing in. Cap was indeed thinking of Bucky, but he was also having his mind manipulated by the Cosmic Cube, which is why he had the flashbacks and bad dreams. As for Agent 13, as you saw last issue, she's still alive and kicking.

You guys printed my letter! I guess it's a big deal to me because it's Cap and the letter is my reaction to Nomad's death, something I take very seriously. I've long been an internet champion to the character of Nomad. In fact, this month marks the eighth anniversary of my first stringing together some rough HTML into what soon after became my comprehensive (read: obsessive) Nomad fansite.

I'm writing this letter now and if lightning (like justice?) were to strike twice, it would find itself in the letter column of what might be the most important issue ever to Nomad fans like myself. I don't know what to expect come CAPTAIN AMERICA #7, but I assure you I'll be reading over the issue with a magnifying glass. I mean, how many third stringer heroes get one last retrospective issue before they get shuffled off to the realm of Death?

Thanks again and not to worry, you may have "whacked" my favorite hero of all time, but his hero was Cap and that's why I'm still here.

Darryl Etheridge
Toronto, Ontario

Hey, look at that, lightning just struck twice, Darryl.

QUESTION OF THE MONTH: Kirby or Ditko?

Ed Brubaker: Ditko. I don't think he ever drew Cap (maybe a one-off or an annual?), but his Spider-Man is my all-time favorite Marvel work.

Steve Epting: If we're talking Spider-Man, Dr. Strange, or Squirrel Girl--Ditko. Everything else--Kirby.

John Paul Leon: I'd probably go with Ditko--I gotta get back to work now!

Frank D'Armata: Kirbko--it's my version of the Amalgam DC/Marvel Universe. Besides, I'm too young to choose.

Molly Lazer: I have to go with Kirby--he has fun descriptive terms associated with him, like "Kirby-crackle" and "Kirbyosity." Ooh...Kirbyosity...

Andy Schmidt: Ditko sounds like Ditka, and he's clearly awesome, but Kirby sounds like Derby, and since I just made about $300 bucks on the Kentucky Derby, I'm going with him. Kirby it is.

Stephanie Moore: An impossible choice but I guess if I had to chose, it'd be Ditko.

Tom Brevoort: You can't choose between these guys. Kirby is the chocolate and Ditko the strawberry in the ice cream selection of Marvel. Without either one, all you're left with is vanilla.

CAPTAIN AMERICA #5. Such a good issue. Fine, subtle, Michael Lark art. Constant snowfall. You could feel the weather. The portrayal of our hero as a soldier has never been done this well. Such a melancholy mood to the book. Very mature. The best Marvel books are the ones that look like they could be digested by "young adults", but are subversively really for people like me (34, long time reader, college/grad school-educated.) This is definitely one of those books.

How could you possibly make this book better? Keep responding to readers on the letters page (do writers have any idea how much readers appreciate that?). Unearth Michael Zeck and put him on covers. Read Robert Reich's liberal primer "Reason" and incorporate some of those ideas into the book (subversively of course, God forbid you should make the book overtly political and offend red-staters.) You can do it, Ed.

Waseem Hussain
Southern Illinois, USA

I like where you're coming from, Waseem, but about those covers... are you crazy? I dig Mike Zeck's Cap work, in fact, his run with J.M. DeMatteis is one of my favorites, but Steve Epting's covers for this series are some of the best I've seen in mainstream comics in years, as are his interiors, obviously (which is why Tom and I have Steve chained to a desk in the Marvel basement).

I'm glad that you're enjoying the tone of the book, and while it is all-ages, I've always felt that the best all-ages material could be enjoyed just as much by adults as youngsters. And my experience reading "Young Adult" books has shown me that mature topics are what interest most kids anyway.

I don't often write to comics anymore. Heck, I hardly even buy any new comics these days, but recently I decided to take a chance on the new CAPTAIN AMERICA book attracted at first by its great artwork. But since then, I've learned to get into the story as well and must say you guys are doing a fine job...in fact, the best interpretation of Cap since...well, since Stan left the book! But what prompted me to write now was a single page in issue #5 where Cap describes what Bucky was really like. Combined with Lark's art, this sequence finally fulfilled what I'd always considered Bucky to be: a youth rather than a child (the way Lee/Kirby depicted him in TALES OF SUSPENSE), smart (he was obviously fluent in German to have impersonated a Hitler Youth in SGT. FURY #13), and tough (he had no compunction about tossing grenades into barracks filled with Nazis or using a machine gun as he often did in TOS). Did you have those Code approved hints of Bucky's combat skills in mind when you wrote page 12, Mr. Brubaker? If not, I'd be surprised!

Pierre Comtois
(via email)

I did indeed have all those old Bucky scenes in mind when I wrote issue 5. I've long considered Bucky to be one of the coolest and under-utilized characters in the Marvel Universe. And really, it only makes sense that any teenager running around with the Invaders would be tough as hell.

And that's it for this edition of Freedom of Speech, folks. Keep those cards and letters and emails coming and we'll keep printing them. And join us next month for the start of our next chapter, The Winter Soldier, and find out if that was really Bucky in issue 6 or not.

Ed Brubaker

STEPHANIE MOORE & MOLLY LAZER
ASST. EDITORS

ANDY SCHMIDT
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

TOM BREVOORT
EDITOR

JOE QUESADA
CHIEF

FREEDOM OF SPEECH C/O MARVEL COMICS
417 5TH AVE., NEW YORK, NY 10016

E-MAIL:
MHEROES@
MARVEL.COM
MARK E-MAIL
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